The Russo-Ottoman War (1768–1774): what actually happened

Late 18th-century Eurasia was basically an imperial chessboard, and Russia under Catherine the Great was feeling ambitious. She wanted access to the Black Sea, which had been, for

centuries, more or less an Ottoman lake. To do that, Russia needed to weaken the Ottoman Empire, pry open sea access, and expand influence into territories the Ottomans considered theirs.

The war officially kicked off because Russia got

tangled in Polish affairs. Russian troops crossed into Ottoman territory while chasing Polish rebels, and the Ottomans, already paranoid about Russian intentions, declared war. But honestly, Russia was itching for this fight anyway, because weakening the Ottomans

served every strategic goal Catherine had.

The Ottomans thought they could contain Russia. They couldn't. Russian armies crushed Ottoman forces in several major land battles (notably in Moldavia and Wallachia), while the Russian navy

pulled a bold move: sailing all the way from the Baltic into the Mediterranean and then smashing the Ottoman fleet at Çeşme in 1770. Imagine the shock—an empire confident of its naval tradition getting humiliated by a newcomer. That kind of humiliation sticks.

By 1774, the Ottoman position was beyond shaky. The peace settlement—the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca—was brutal for them and glorious for Russia. It gave Russia a foothold on the Black Sea, declared the Crimean Khanate “independent”

from the Ottomans (translation: under Russian control), and granted Russia the right to “protect” Orthodox Christians inside the Ottoman Empire. That so-called protector clause becomes a major geopolitical excuse later, like a blank cheque for intervention.

Why this mattered historically

This wasn’t just another border war. It marked a turning point:

- The Ottoman Empire’s Black Sea dominance

basically broke.

- Russia transformed from a northern land-power into a southern naval power.
- From here on, Russia played a much bigger role in Balkan politics.
- The “decline of the Ottomans” didn’t start here, but this war accelerated it noticeably.

• The famous Crimean annexation (1783) is basically a sequel to this treaty.

In the longer arc, this war is one of those moments where the balance of power in Eastern Europe truly shifts. It sets up a whole series of 19th-century tensions (Russia

vs Ottomans vs Austrians vs British), contributes to the "Eastern Question," and indirectly feeds into the geopolitics that eventually explode in World War I. (History is one long messy chain reaction.)

What it wasn’t

Despite all the propaganda used at the time, this wasn’t some sacred Christian liberation crusade or a holy Muslim defense. It was naked strategy: access to warm-water ports, imperial bragging

rights, and control of trade. Religion was the wrapping paper, not the motive.

One-line takeaway

Catherine's Russia punched the Ottomans so hard that the entire

power map of the Black Sea changed, and Russia walked away as a rising empire while the Ottomans walked away one step closer to systemic decline.

Modern vibes: geopolitics was already “my company is bigger than yours,” just with

more powdered wigs.